

A RELEVANT MODEL FOR PREPARING ASPIRING SUPERINTENDENTS*

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Abstract

The relevance of administrative preparation programs has been questioned. The questions center around how well programs are preparing school leaders to deal with the myriad of requirements placed in front of them (i.e. demands relate to issues of accountability, changing demographics, aging professionals, demanding publics, and school board/superintendent relations) while inspiring people to focus on a shared vision. Given the concerns, one administrative preparation program developed a new model for superintendent preparation. Key components included (a) extensive practitioner involvement, (b) the use of standards as the foundation, (c) a relevant and varied year-long field internship, and (d) the use of university and K-12 partnerships. The model addresses the criticism of current preparation programs and addresses the necessary entry level skills needed by 21st century superintendents.

1 Introduction

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Over the last several years the relevance of administrative preparation programs has been questioned. The concern surfaces around whether or not programs are preparing school leaders to deal with the myriad of challenges that accompany school leadership. Elmore (2000) contends school leadership requires a process of distributive leadership focused on instruction. He believes the superintendent is responsible for designing systems for program improvement as well as allocating system resources for improved instruction. Levine (2005) notes in a time of significant social and cultural change, superintendents are faced with challenges that demand high levels of skill and knowledge in management and leadership. Specifically, the demands relate to issues of accountability, changing demographics, aging professionals, demanding publics, and challenging school board/superintendent relations; all while being expected to inspire a shared vision.

Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000) conclude that a 21st century superintendent will spend significant time working with community groups, responding to state and federal mandates, and working with publics in the area of vouchers, home schooling and privatization. They contend that the successful superintendent must have “excellent communication skills, understand the instructional process, and work to create functional coalitions that will ensure financial and educational survival of the public school system” (p. x). Ten areas are noted as crucial for a comprehensive administrative preparation program: (a) strategic planning, (b) student rights in terms of due process, (c) changing demographics, (d) personal time management, (e)

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site based management, (f) effective public relations, (g) staff recruitment, (h) empowerment of staff, (i) administrator-board relations and (j) staff and administrator evaluations.

Levin reports that preparation programs “offered little in the way of meaningful clinical or field based experiences” (2005, p. 41). He concludes, “Collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of all programs at the nation’s schools” (p. 13). Glass, et al. (2000) note four significant weaknesses in superintendent preparation programs: lack of hands on application, inadequate technology, failure to link content to practice, and too much emphasis on professor experience.

Murphy (2007) observes that little progress has occurred during the past half century to address deficits in preparation programs. He contends it is the application of skills and not theory that school leaders need and emphasizes the importance of making practice the center of preparation programs. He posits the question, “What is it that senior leaders need in schools and districts to be effective, and how can they access that knowledge, skills and set of values?” (p. 584).

Fry, Bottoms, O’Neill and Walker (2007) contend that too many administrative preparation programs offer last century curriculum and do not spend enough time helping aspiring school leaders develop competencies. They note that aspiring school leaders need on-the-job training not classroom instruction via textbooks and assert that administrative preparation programs should be held accountable for relevant content and quality school based internships; too many internship experiences are in name only and fail to assure the intern is given a rich and meaningful experience.

Meyer and Ashley (2006) recommend school leadership training programs focus on preparing leaders who can improve student learning and overcome the myriad of challenges facing schools. They encourage programs to create meaningful clinical internships and experiences that extend the whole year. In addition, Meyer and Ashley emphasize a need to strengthen the partnership between university programs and K-12 school districts.

3 Minnesota State University, Mankato Preparation Program

The administrative preparation program for superintendent licensure at Minnesota State University, Mankato met the criticisms previously listed. The content for the superintendent licensure program mainly focused on management areas (i.e. budget management, human resources). The internships were arranged so individuals would serve under the superintendent of the district where they were employed. There was little, if any, inservice for the supervising superintendent. It was through the luck of the draw that aspiring superintendents received a quality experience. The classes individuals were expected to take were for the most part taught by university professors. Of the five professors who were involved in teaching classes, two had superintendent experience within the last four years, one had principal experience within the last seven years and two had central office experience, one within the last eight years and one over ten years ago. Each person attempted to maintain relevancy within the content of their classes. Some would invite practicing school leaders to be guest speakers. However, there was no consistent process of assuring that field-based relevance was embedded in the program. Moreover, the last revision of the program was in 1997 when Minnesota established a set of state level superintendent competencies.

4 Cohort Model for Aspiring Superintendents

Given the concerns about preparation programs for school leaders and the need to examine how Minnesota State University, Mankato delivered its program for superintendent preparation, a new model was developed. Key components of the program included extensive practitioner involvement, the use of the state level competencies for superintendents as the foundation of the program, a relevant and varied year-long field internship, and the development of university and K-12 partnerships.

The process for developing this model began with a planning meeting between two university faculty and three superintendents. The superintendents were selected based on ten or more years of superintendent experience, recognition by their peers as individuals who were exemplary superintendents (one was the state’s Superintendent of the Year), experience in rural and suburban districts, and gender representation.

The planning meeting resulted in the development of the core content of the program. The practicing superintendents suggested that the content focus on real situations and be developed around such topics as legal, financial, political, school board relations and communications.

5 Seminars

Once the topics were identified, seminars were shaped that included the topics and embedded the state competencies. Minnesota adopted competencies shaped from AASA Standards: Leadership and District Culture; Policy and Governance; Communications and Community Relations; Organizational Management; Curriculum Planning and Development; Instructional Management; Human Resources Management; and Values and Ethics of Leadership.

The seminars included Seminar 1: District Leadership; Seminar 2: Politics, Policy and School Board relations; Seminar 3: Life balance and the superintendency; Seminar 4: Communication and Organizational Oversight; Seminar 5: District Culture Ethics and Values; and Seminar 6: Career preparations for the superintendency. Each of the seminars was conducted by a practicing school superintendent, a school finance expert, a legislator, a school board member, a school attorney or a lobbyist. Legal issues superintendents face, and school finance were included and were delivered under the applicable standard. Presenters were encouraged to tell “their story and the story of the superintendent.” They were also encouraged to be authentic about the life of the superintendent and share the expectations and stress that come with being a superintendent. However, they were also asked to highlight and emphasize the joys and the rewards of the position.

An example of how the seminars and standards were aligned is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample Seminar Structure

Seminars
Seminar I. Politics, Policy, School Board Relations
Presenters: (a) school board member, (b) superintendent, (c) lobbyist, (d) state senator.
Demonstrate an understanding of political theory and skills needed to build community support for district priorities.
Identify the political forces in a community.
Identify the political context of the community environment.
Describe procedures for superintendent-board of education interpersonal and working relationships.
Describe the system of public school governance in our democracy.
Formulate district policy for external and internal programs.
Relate local policy to state and federal regulations and requirements.
Describe procedures to avoid civil and criminal liabilities.
Seminar II. Life Balance
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Presenter: (a) superintendent
Family and superintendency
Superintendency and balanced life
Seminar III. District Culture, Ethics, and Values
Presenters: (Demonstrate ethical and personal integrity;a) panel of superintendents.
Exhibit multicultural and ethnic understanding and sensitivity.
Describe the role of schooling in a democratic society.
Describe the role of schooling in a democratic society.
Demonstrate ethical and personal integrity;
Model accepted moral and ethical standards in all interactions.
Describe a strategy to promote the value that moral and ethical practices are established and practiced in each classroom and school.
Formulate a plan to coordinate social, health, and other community agencies to support each child in the district.
Seminar IV. Career Preparation
Presenters: (a) superintendent and (b) university professors.
Career mapping
Internal vs. externalLong range preparation

Table 1

6 Internships

Minnesota has a state requirement that aspiring school leaders complete 320 hours of internship under the tutelage of an experienced superintendent. With that as a basic framework, the internships of the program were structure in two ways. First, participants were expected to individually complete 150 hours with a licensed superintendent. They could select the superintendent within their district but were encouraged to spend time with a superintendent from a different district. The rationale for this suggestion was to provide the aspiring superintendent the opportunity to experience different leadership styles. An internship log, a completed supervisor agreement memo, a completed supervisor evaluation and the collection of appropriate artifacts was expected from the individual internship experiences.

The second part of the internship was structured as a group experience. This group experience was developed to support the cohort structure where participants would learn from each other as well as from the field experts. During these group internships each group was responsible to set up times to be involved in individual meetings, organizational meetings and/or conferences, or other appropriate activities that addressed the area. Table 2 demonstrates the structure of the group internship. Each group (A, B, and C) consisted of three-four participants who determined how to operate through the internship hours based on the scheduled months/topics. The goal was to accrue 30 hours per two month experience with the intent to be immersed in the topic identified and to gain insight experiences through the guidance of the assigned field expert. Groups were assigned specific topics and experts during different months to avoid doubling up on the same topic and field expert.

Table 2 Group Internship Schedule

Topic	Oct-Nov	Dec-Jan	Feb-Mar	Apr-May	Jun-July
Leadership and Governance; Field expert: Superintendent; Communications—internal and external; Field expert: Superintendent	A	B			C
Politics and Policy; Field expert: Executive Directors of school lobbyist groups and Executive Director of superintendent organization	C	A	B		
School Board Relations and Community Relations; Field expert: Superintendent			A	C	B
Instruction, Curriculum, Assessment; Field expert: Superintendent	B	C		A	
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Legal and Ethical Issues; Field experts; School district attorneys			C	B	A
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Table 2

Actual meeting times, method of communication, and final artifacts were determined through mutual agreement with the participants and the field expert. Each participant was responsible for an individual log, a reflection on the internship experiences, and individual artifacts generated from the experiences.

The purpose of the two types of internships was (a) to allow for aspiring superintendents to have the opportunity to learn from a superintendent they admired and respected (the individual internships) and (b) to allow for in-depth learning on selected and relevant topics (group internship).

7 Assessments - Portfolio and Supervisor Evaluation

A portfolio presentation demonstrating entry level understanding of the competencies was one form of student assessment. Each aspiring superintendent was required to develop a portfolio based on the eight standards/competencies. This portfolio was to include three-five artifacts for each standard/competency demonstrating learning and entry level skills to the superintendency. The portfolio preparation was ongoing throughout the year and included artifacts generated from seminar participation, internship experiences, and individual professional experiences. Group and individual preparation of the portfolio occurred throughout the program.

The portfolio was reviewed at the end of the year-long experience and included an evaluation by a practicing superintendent and a university professor. Each aspiring superintendent was required to present a portfolio and demonstrate the acquired knowledge, skills and dispositions of the superintendency.

The second part of the assessment was the evaluation completed by the individual superintendent supervisor. The evaluations included a rating of the knowledge, skills and dispositions as observed by the field supervisor in each of the eight superintendent standards/competencies.

8 Participants

Defined participant expectations were shared upfront with individuals interested in the cohort. Participants were asked to commit to: (a) preparation and participation in seminars, internships, portfolio, (b) ongoing individual and group growth, (c) one-on-one professional conversations and guidance from a practicing school superintendent with evidence of participant initiative to ongoing communication and growth from the experience, (d) stretching self beyond comfort zone to include exploring and analyzing differences with different districts and/or different organizations associated with the superintendent (i.e. law firms, professional organizations), and (e) engage in continuous assessment of one's leadership skills.

It is important to describe the membership of this first cohort. Although the makeup of the cohort was not purposely planned, the dynamic of the group played a significant part in the overall effectiveness of the model. It had been predetermined to keep the size of the cohort to a maximum of ten participants. This number allowed for maximum engagement during the seminars and assured quality internships. The membership consisted of nine women and one man. Of the nine women six were women of color and three were Caucasian. The one man was Latino. All were practicing school leaders. Four of the ten were central office; the remaining six were building principals. Each had a different expectation of her/his career path. Many were interested in securing a superintendent license "just in case" the opportunity arose. Some were interested in exploring the "life" of the superintendency, and some were actively seeking a position of superintendent or assistant superintendent in the near future.

9 Outcomes of the Experience

At the conclusion of the first cohort, presenters, field practitioners and participants were asked to provide feedback on the model. The presenters and field practitioners were asked to comment on their involvement in the program and their perspective on the model. Participants were asked to respond to the following: (a) was the content of program relevant, (b) what skills and new learning took place, (c) what was the most significance part of the program, and (d) did you feel the program prepared you for the superintendency? Table 3 illustrates feedback from some of the presenters and field practitioners.

Table 3 Presenter and Field Practitioner Feedback

Positions	Statement of experience	How you would evaluate the experience?	Would you be willing to participate in second cohort?	Suggestions
Superintendent	I found the experience to be very valuable.	I learned as much for the participants as they did from me.	Yes, without a doubt.	
Superintendent	The experience was easily the most meaningful regarding preparing aspiring superintendents. The participants' engagement went well beyond any presentations. Most keep in contact with me to pick my brain.	I was interested in the learning the participants were gaining though their experiences. I wish I had had the opportunity of such an experience.	Yes, I am happy to be part of the second cohort.	
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Superintendent	It was a great experience.	The nuts and bolts of getting the work done is vital to preparing superintendents. The information share during the seminars was relevant to the “real world” of schools.	Yes, I would be honored to be a part of the next group.	Perhaps the need to spend more time on the public relations issues.
Superintendent	From my view point mentoring small groups was very good. Conversations were rich and full of meaningful experiences. I learned a lot about myself.	The aspiring superintendents that I worked with were phenomenal. The school district that lands them will be so lucky.	I would need to consider the time commitment as I have accepted some additional obligations.	
Lobbyist	It was great to see and work with the new breed of superintendents.	The knowledge they brought was great. They were so eager to learn.	Yes, I am very interested.	
School district attorneys	The opportunity to share is part of our firm’s commitment to the field.	We wanted to make sure they understood the legal pitfalls that await superintendents.	Yes.	

Table 3

The data suggests the presenters and field practitioners viewed the experience as meeting the expected outcomes of the model. They noted the relevancy and significance of the program and believed the participants were prepared for the superintendency. Moreover, they assessed the process as an effective way to provide the aspiring superintendent an appreciation for the “real life” and “nuts and bolts” of the superintendent position.

Participants also provided feedback. Table 4 is a listing of responses from some of the participants regarding their perceptions of the model.

Table 4 Participant Feedback

Participant	Value of the experience	What learning took place	Relevance in preparing for the superintendency	Most significant part of the model
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Participant 1	This was an authentic approach to learning and was extremely valuable and replicated best practices.	Common themes of networking, team building and recognizing that the superintendent is not the end-all/know-all position. Above all, the superintendent needs integrity.	I believe the information prepared me to move in direction of the superintendency.	Each component brought an important element to my professional development. I learned so much from sitting back and listening to practitioners. This could not have been learned from a book.
Participant 2	I like the size; it was just right; it allowed us to work together.	While I had contemplated going into the superintendency, meeting with practicing leaders allowed me to see the good and bad of being a superintendent. After each meeting I was left with the feeling that the good outweighed the bad. One of the key learnings was not to forget the children.	The people other than superintendents added to the relevance of the program. They helped shape a clear picture of the role of the superintendent and their relationship.	Able to attend different conferences and activities. I learned that you need to surround yourself with quality people. The structure as a whole allowed busy principals to participate in the internships.
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Participant 3	Absolutely it was a valuable experience for me and I believe for my cohort members.	It was impressive to learn from both university professors and practitioners in the field. It was well-rounded and extremely valuable. It prepared me well to embark on the superintendency with confidence.	Yes, it presented relevance for me. The way the course was designed made it possible for me to gain the experiences I needed. Working with all the stakeholders and key players in the life of the superintendent made it relevant.	The structure of the internships with different people in the field—superintendents, school attorneys, lobbyists and school board members—was significant.
Participant 4	Absolutely, both personally and professionally.	My greatest learning occurred during the seminars and my individual internship.	This is difficult to answer because I don't know what I don't know. But I do feel prepared at an 'entry level.' I am more prepared than I was a year ago.	The highlight of the program was to learn and interact with a fine group of professionals. The seminar presenters were talented, encouraging and responsive to my needs. They demonstrated a passion for the job.
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Participant 5	Yes, hearing from practicing superintendents.	I was not aware of the extent of the relationships that occur with the school board and how important it is to have to solid communication with them.	Yes, but just like any job I feel I need to do the job to get my feet wet.	Hearing from the superintendents and also the reflective piece that I completed for the portfolio presentation.
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Table 4

The results of the feedback from the aspiring superintendents would support the belief that the expected outcomes of the model were met. They felt prepared for the superintendency. They were engaged in real life experiences and saw the depth of issues superintendents face. They also were appreciative of the opportunity to learn in groups and to learn from each other. This established a network not only with their peers but also with practicing superintendents.

As determined by the supervisor evaluations and the portfolio reviews the participants demonstrated a level of confidence and ability. The restructured cohort for aspiring superintendents appeared to prepare individuals for the world of the superintendent.

10 Conclusion

The model described is an effort to provide the relevance needed for aspiring superintendent programs. As noted in the literature, it is a critical time for those in the superintendency to possess a strong set of skills and expectations. The professional development of quality school leadership begins with a quality preparation program. This model was Minnesota State University Mankato's effort to provide such a program. It is founded on the framework of relevant experiences, extensive practitioner involvement, standards and competencies, and extensive field experiences. It provided meaningful and purposeful experiences—experiences that conscientiously moved away from the “convenient internship” to an intentional, focused internship. The model is one that addresses the criticism of current preparation programs and addresses the necessary entry level skills needed by 21st century superintendents. However, it would be naive to assume that all the skills are embedded in this model. It is not possible for any institution to prepare school leaders for all the changes they will face during their tenure. It is instead a preparation program's obligation to provide the foundation from which aspiring school leaders can continue to grow. This model does that.

11 References

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